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BY
JAMES ROBINSON
J.H. WILLIAMS
AND **MICK GRAY**

SHADE



#.97

Heart of Darkness



*In 1893, I encountered
a Ludlow. Marcus Ludlow.
Before realizing who he was,
I had even liked him somewhat.*

*I had been on a quest
to find a lost Arabian
kingdom. Marcus
Tring (as he called
himself) had been my
partner in this venture.*

*Throughout our travails,
the serpent that has attacked
us, the Leopard Men, the
charge of the nomad riders...
all of it, Marcus had been
more than happy to stand
back and let my shadow
power protect the pair of us.*

*Indeed, he'd seemed
wholly and utterly
satisfied with
this arrangement.*

*And then we
found our lost
kingdom.*



*And Marcus
Ludlow had
smiled at me
and slapped my
back like a good
friend might.*

And then he struck.



The Shade Book 2: Rupert and Marguerite: 1865 & 1931

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*Ah, but I jump ahead
of myself, as I am known
to do.*

*It was earlier, 1865, when
I next encountered a Ludlow
after my slaughter of Piers
Ludlow and his family. I
had thought the matter closed,
not realizing the hate I would
spawn in the two youngest surviving
children. A hatred that would
manifest itself again and again.*

Yes...

*...it was
1865.*

SO TELL ME,
MR. BARTHOLOMEW,
YOUR ASKING PRICE
FOR THE HAMPSHIRE
PLOTS. IT IS SURELY
A JEST. AND A MERRY
ONE AT THAT.

I REALIZE I
SHALL PROBABLY BE
SWINDLED IN THIS
VENTURE, BUT DO SO
WILLINGLY FOR THE
SAKE OF OUR
FRIENDSHIP.

OH, YOU
DO ME WRONG,
MY DEAR SIR.

WHY, NO SIR.
THERE IS NOTHING
FUNNY ABOUT MY
DEMAND. IN FACT I
THINK IT WHOLLY FAIR
AND PROPER CONSIDERING
THE ACREAGE. IT IS
A VAST AREA, YOU
REALIZE?


YOU DO
REALIZE THAT,
MR. BLACK?

KRAKON

YOU DO
ME GRAVE AND
TERRIBLE WRO--




OH MY SAINTED--




SO, MY DEAR,
DARK FRIEND, WE
MEET AGAIN,
FINALLY.

DO I
KNOW YOU?
HAVE WE
MET?

YOU HAVE
NO RECOLLECTION
OF MY FACE? IT
HAS NOT BEEN
THAT LONG,
SURELY.



I AM RUPERT
LUDLOW. I WAS A
BOY WHEN WE LAST
MET. WHEN YOU
KILLED MY FATHER
AND FAMILY.

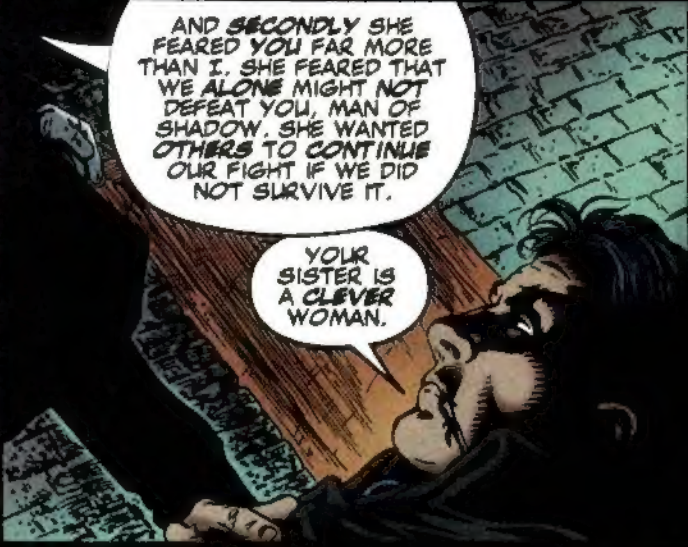


THAT WAS
TWENTY...NO...MORE
THAN TWENTY YEARS
AGO.

YES, I SPENT
THE TIME LEARNING
OF YOU. YOUR
ABILITIES. I HAVE
SPENT THE TIME
BECOMING A MAN,
AMASSING POWER,
WEALTH.


MY SISTER AND
I HAVE BOTH MARRIED
TOO. WE HAVE CHILDREN.
MY SISTER HAS DONE
LITTLE MORE THAN SIRE
THESE PAST TWO DECADES.
SHE IS AS FAT AS A HOUSE
FOR THE EFFORT, BUT
SHE WAS DETERMINED
OF TWO THINGS.

ONE THAT OUR
LUDLOW STRAIN WOULD
PROSPER...THAT OUR
FAMILY WOULD SPAN
THE GLOBE AND
BE KNOWN.



AND SECONDLY SHE
FEARED YOU FAR MORE
THAN I. SHE FEARED THAT
WE ALONE MIGHT NOT
DEFEAT YOU, MAN OF
SHADOW. SHE WANTED
OTHERS TO CONTINUE
OUR FIGHT IF WE DID
NOT SURVIVE IT.

YOUR
SISTER IS
A CLEVER
WOMAN.



DO YOU THINK?
ME, LOOKING DOWN
AT YOU SO CLOSE TO
DEATH, THINK HER A
SILLY THING FOR
WORRYING SO. YOU
WALKED INTO THIS
AMBUSH LIKE A FOOL
AND SHALL DIE
LIKE ONE.



THESE MEN,
ARE THEY LUDLOWS
TOO? YOUR SONS
OR NEPHEWS?

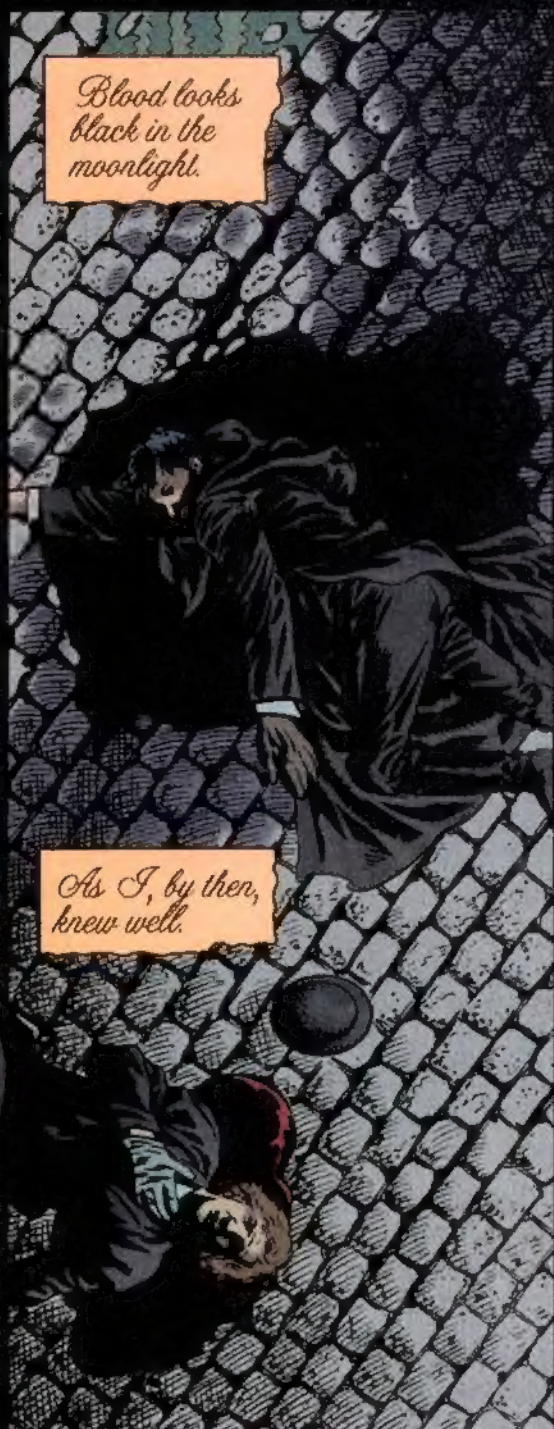
NO, THESE
MEN ARE
HIRED.

SO IF I KILL
YOU, WHAT IS TO
STOP THEM FROM
LEAVING ME ALIVE.
ESPECIALLY IF I
OFFER TO PAY THEM
DOUBLE WHAT
YOU OFFER.

YOU ARE NOT
GOING TO KILL ME
SHADE. YOU ARE DYING.
THERE IS **BLOOD**
ALL AROUND YOU.



THIS?
WHY, THIS
IS NOT
BLOOD.



*Blood looks
black in the
moonlight.*

*As I, by then,
knew well.*



I lay there for a lengthy while. Many hours. The riflemen had long since vanished and left me to the night, along with Rupert Ludlow's corpse. I have never feared the dark, my brethren. But this night, as I lay there, I admit to being fearful. Not of supernatural things, but of the dirty and the foul that walk upon two legs, which London Town had in abundance. In the time since I became that which I am, I had noticed that I no longer seemed to age. However, the time span was not yet enough for me to be absolute on this matter. It is a weighty thing to grasp...and more so to accept. But by this point I had begun to think me immortal. Now, to find that I was not invulnerable had me shaken in the extreme. I had visions of me broken and twisted, scarred and maimed and cursed to live on in this terrible state.



"Oh, how I hate you. Ludlow. How I hate your whole cursed family," I said to Rupert's corpse. His response, of course, was lacking wit by this point.

I suppose I passed out. I awoke about an hour later by the sound of Rupert's body being stripped of its clothing. Two vagrants were at the corpse like dogs upon meat. By the time I fully grasped the situation, Rupert was naked but for his frilly silk shirt which the pair were tearing in half in their effort each to acquire the garment for themselves.

"I mine," one wretch yelled. "You 'ad 'is watch, m' getting 'is silk."

"No you ain't," the other larger fellow screamed back. "I takes what I wants. You ain't stoppin' me from 'avin' it all."

He jerked his head towards me, not realizing that I wasn't dead.

"Go see wot the other wun 'as. He looks like he has a bob or two."

Leave me this 'un and you go fer the one in black."

The smaller vagrant, sensing his pickings would be light otherwise, decided this advice was to be taken.

He advanced towards me, a look of displeasure crossing his face as he saw my state more clearly.

"No! This ain't fair. This one's all messy. I can't sell none of 'is cloth if it's covered in pitch or whatever it is."

He took another step. I fired a bolt of shadow form which entered the fellow in the chest. He dropped with a whisper.

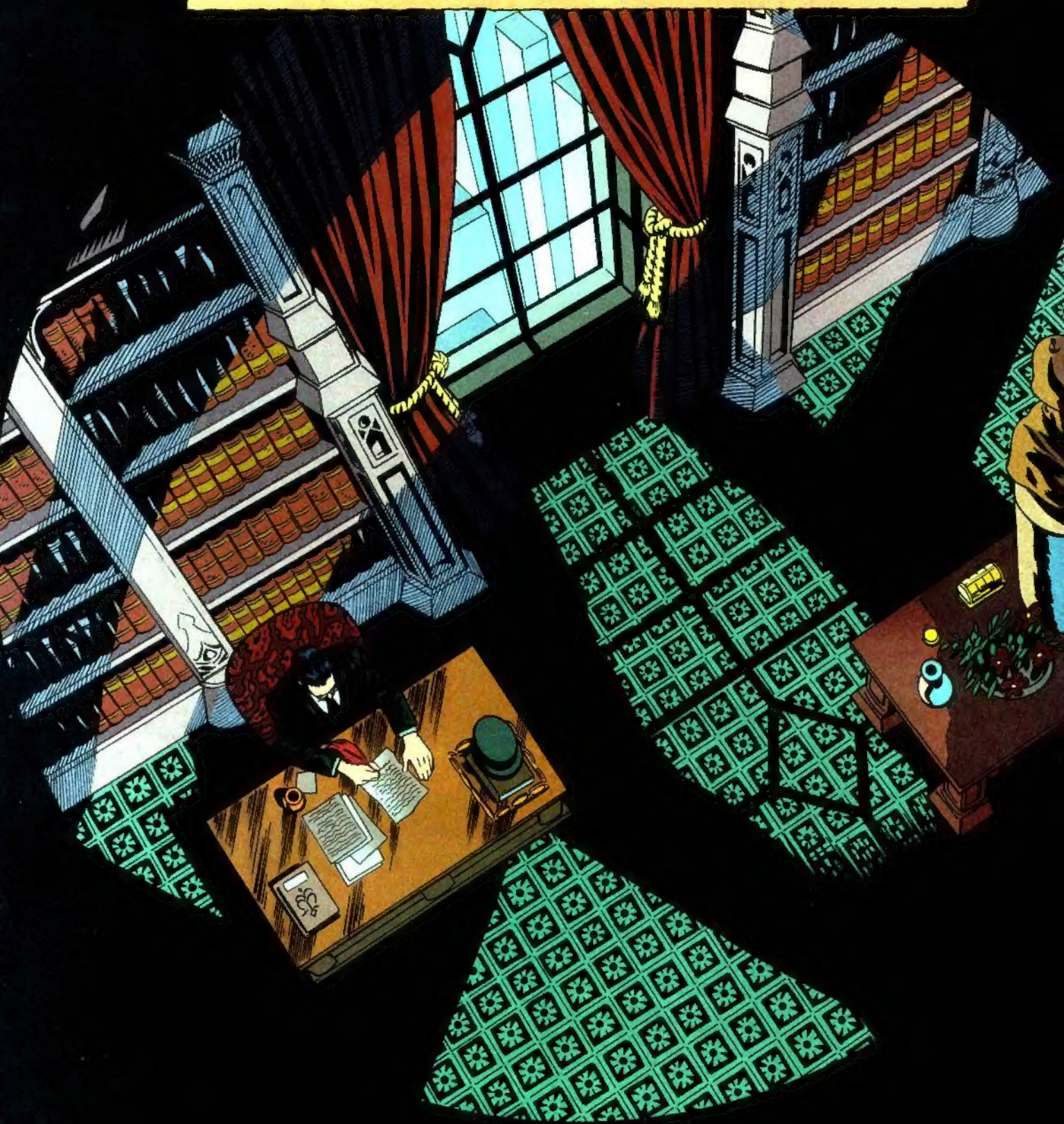
"What's goin' 'awn?" The other, taller fellow looked over as he said it. This causing the moonlight to hit his face and made his fierce, black eyes glow like agate. A perfect target. I fired another bolt of shadow form, this blasting one of those gleaming black orbs from his skull before continuing on into what little brain the man had to begin with.

It took me hours to crawl home, and years to learn that I had the ability to draw the shadow form within me, back into my body, thereby sealing any wounds I might incur.

Of course, if I was riddled with bullets, or blown apart by mortar, I might not have the energy for such a feat. But had I that knowledge that I would later gain, I might in this case have mended myself earlier than I did, and made my way home in a goodly manner.

Still and all, the finest thing about everlasting life is that I have the time to learn.

*It would be four years before another Ludlow tried his luck. 1869.
Emma's oldest son.*



*Our arena was
the sewers below
Paris.*

*And the rats
had his body.*





Hmmm.

Suddenly a conversation comes to mind. One I shared with Brian Savage, back when we were wary allies but not yet the friends we would be. I had saved his life. This had been for no heroic nor altruistic reasons, but merely because he had gamed quite heavily in the week prior among the dens of old Opal's Chinese quarter. In the course of losing vast sums to many Asians, he had also managed to lose a fair amount to me. Luckily for all but Savage, he was a much better shot than he was a card player. Anyway, we had played poker, and then rummy and then some 21 to end the night. I think that if Savage won a single hand it was because I let him in order he not become too disheartened and stop playing while still having money I might take from him.

In the week that followed this, while he tried to find the funds to pay his debts, I heard of a plot to kill him. Old enemies. Three gunfighters, with bad breath and bad smelling clothes. They hunted Savage down and chose a moment when Savage was enjoying a doxy's charms to literally catch him without his weapon (or at least one with which he might kill them, haha) Savage surely would have died if not for my intervention.



"I didn't like you none,"
Savage told me with a snarl as
he dressed himself.

"Thought you a mite swishy
with your voice and your lace
and your lah-de-dah ways.
All the time I was losing to
you at cards, I was praying
for a glimpse o' you dealing
from the underside or getting an
ace from out of them flowery
sleeves of yours.

"That would have given me the
chance to nail you 'tween the eyes.
Been a while since I cut a
scalp free of a man's skull, but
had I killed you, I'd be surely
tempted to renew old habits.

"Yeah, the fruity pomade on your
hair would a sweetened up my
office. Hell, it's enough it
wouldn't sweetened up the stable."

"Is this your idea of a thank you?"
I said with a tone of bemused
indignation. "Good heavens, if it
is, then I fear your insults.

Savage begin rolling a cigarette.

"I ain't insulting you. You'd
know for sure if I was.

I'm just saying that I'm glad
I didn't kill you.

He lit up, striking the match
to flame upon the inside of his
fingernail.

"Knew a fella called Ballash.
He was like you. Smug and a
mite swishy. Smelled like a bordello,
but I got to like him pretty much
fore long. Only tried to kill him twice
before that. Turned out I was
happy I didn't then too."

"Pray give me his address,"
I replied. "Perhaps there's a club
we can form.

Savage's expression became dark.

"You joke, but when I hate
I hate, and when I don't,
I don't. N' I don't hate you no
more. And worse for me, I
owe you."

Savage later learned of a
Ludlow who arrived in Opal
having spent years studying in the
islands of the Caribbean and South
America, mastering dark magic
with which he might overcome my
shadow power and see me done.

If I was in any danger,
Savage never gave him the chance
to find out however, and gunned
the man down. This, being
Benjamin Ludlow, Rupert's
second oldest.

*But then I fell
in love.*

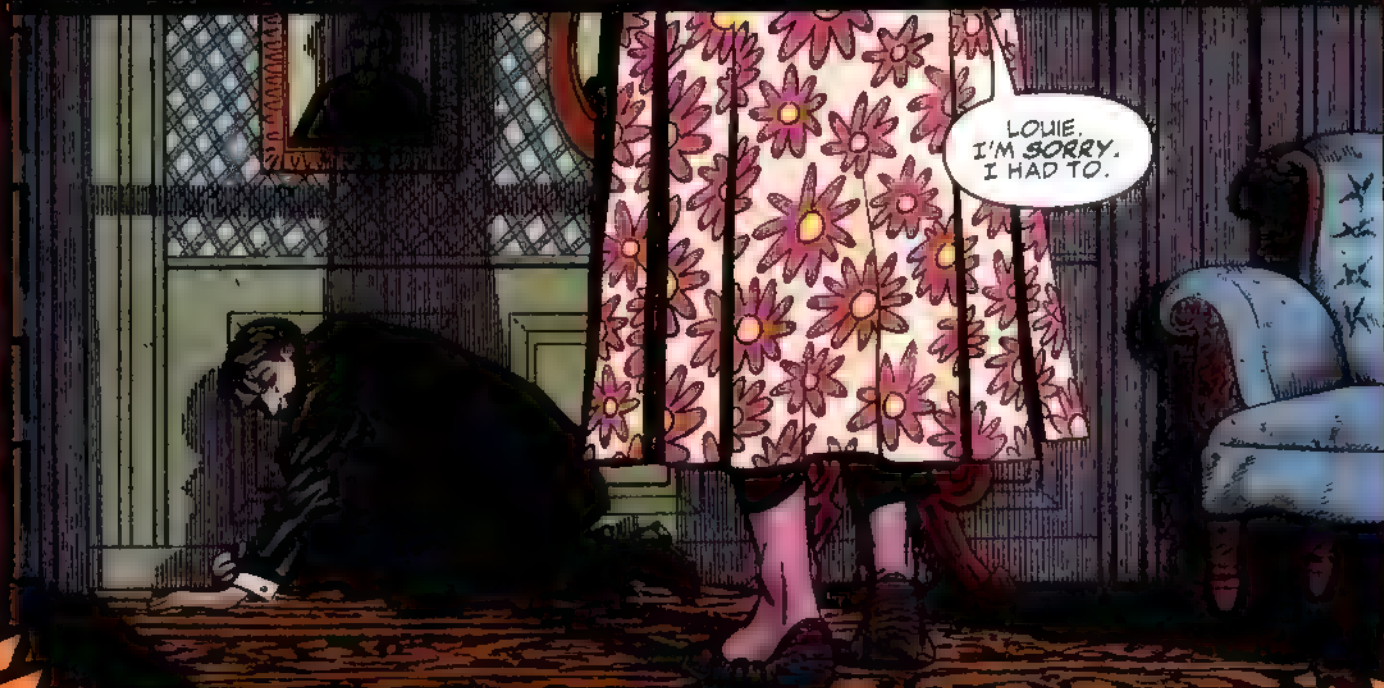
*The name the girl
gave me was Marguerite
Croft. She would break
my heart.*

*It was 1931
It was Paris.*

*And love was an
easy thing to
catch in that
year. In that
city.*

UH.

UH.



YOU HAD ...
TO ...POISON ME?
FOR ...WHY?

YOU KNEW ME
AS MARGUERITE
CROFT.

I LOVED ...
YOU AS THAT ...
YES.

YES,
LUDLOW.
I AM A
LUDLOW.

BUT MY
FAMILY CAME
HERE FROM
ENGLAND IN
1905. AND
THEIR FAMILY
NAME--

LUDLOW.

YOU LIED ...
UH ...TO ME
ABOUT YOUR ...
NAME.


AS YOU
DID "LOUIE
FOX." AS YOU
DID.

HEAVENS, ...US ...
MARGUERITE, WE ARE
LOVERS. HOW COULD ...
YOU ALLOW ME TO
GET AS CLOSE AS
WE HAVE, AND PLAN
TO ...KILL ME ALL ...
ALONG?

AND I NEVER
INTENDED WE WOULD
BECOME AS INTIMATE
AS WE HAVE. I
NEVER--

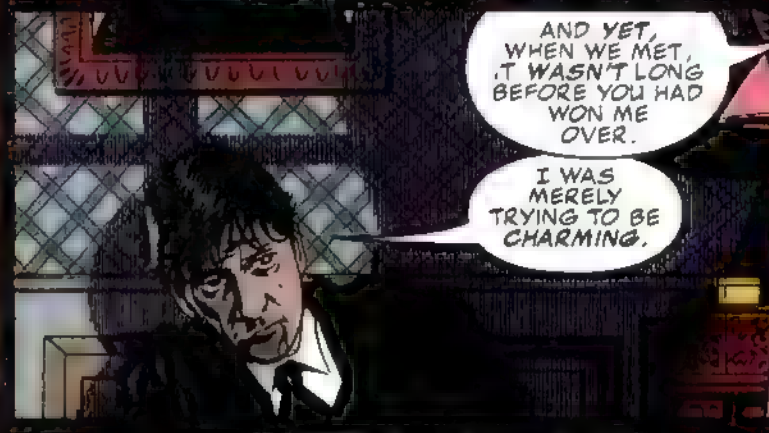
I LOVE YOU TOO.
I DIDN'T THINK I
COULD. I HAVE SPENT
MY LIFE ...MY CHILDHOOD
THINKING YOU WERE A
MONSTER. IMMORTAL AND
DARK. A SUPERNATURAL
MENACE.

YOU HAVE
TOLD ME OF
DEEDS YOU'VE DONE
YOURSELF. SOME
WERE FAR COLDER.
FAR MORE CALCULATING.




YOU KNOW
THAT IN OUR
FAMILY, WE ARE
SCARED TO BED
AS CHILDREN
WITH THREATS
OF YOU.

I
HAD NO
IDEA.




AND YET,
WHEN WE MET,
IT WASN'T LONG
BEFORE YOU HAD
WON ME
OVER.

I WAS
MERELY
TRYING TO BE
CHARMING.



OH YOU WERE,
CHARMING AND FUNNY
AND SWEET. ALL THE
THINGS I HAD THOUGHT
YOU INCAPABLE OF
BEING.



DO YOU
RECALL OUR FIRST
NIGHT TOGETHER
DO YOU RECALL
MY TEARS AFTER-
WARD.

I RECALL
I KISSED
THOSE TEARS
AWAY

I CRIED
BECAUSE I FELT
A BETRAYER OF
EVERYTHING. ALL I
BELIEVED AND
ASPIRED TO HAD
DED IN YOUR SWEET
EMBRACE.

IS
THAT...SO...
WRONG?

AN END TO ...
HATRED. WHAT...UH...
HAPPENED BETWEEN ME
AND THE...LUDLOWS
TOOK PLACE ALMOST A
HUNDRED...AHH...YEARS AGO.
GOODNESS, WARS...ARE
FORGOTTEN IN LESS...
UHH...TIME.



DO YOU REMEMBER OUR WEEKEND BY THE SEA?

YES, A GLORIOUS OUTING. AND YOU WERE OUTRAGEOUS FROLICKING NAKED ON THE SAND. I WAS FEARFUL THE NEARBY FISHERMEN WOULD SEE YOU.



THEY WERE MORE INTERESTED IN MENDING THEIR NETS BUT YOU, YOU LOOKED HAPPY, LIKE I'VE NEVER KNOWN.

I DON'T UNDERSTAND.



EVEN IN THE BEST TIMES YOU HAVE AN AIR OF SADNESS TO YOUR SMILES AND WE SEE THE ARMOR THAT KEEPS THE SADNESS AT BAY.

BUT THAT DAY, IT WAS LIKE YOU'D LAID YOUR ARMS ASIDE AND EMBRACED HAPPINESS FULLY AND TOTALLY.



I HAD YOU IN MY LIFE. HOW COULD I NOT HAVE BEEN GLAD? HOW COULD I NOT, FOR ONCE, HAVE FORGOTTEN MY PAST AND HOW I CAME TO BE? YES, I WAS HAPPY.

I HAD YOU.



I AM TORN BETWEEN YOU AND MY FAMILY. IT'S KILLING ME, BUT I HAVE TO STAND BY WHAT I'VE DONE.



BUT THIS
POISON. IF I
SURVIVE IT, WILL
YOU LET ME
LIVE?

WHAT OF SANDERSON
LUDLOW? HE KILLED
HIMSELF RATHER THAN
DESTROY THE FRIENDSHIP
HE AND I HAD. COULD YOU
NOT STAND BY HIS EXAMPLE...
NOT BY TAKING YOUR OWN
LIFE, BUT RATHER THE PUTTING
ASIDE OF HATRED FOR
SOMETHING FINER.

SANDERSON, MY
COUSIN? HIS NAME IS
NOT SPOKEN OF BY THE
FAMILY. THAT IS WHAT'S
THOUGHT OF SANDERSON
LUDLOW AND HIS NOBLE
CHOICE.

SURVIVE IT?
I LACED YOUR
FOOD WITH ENOUGH
TO KILL AN ARMY.



MY BODY IS
DIFFERENT. IT CAN
REPAIR ITSELF. THE
PAIN IS UNBEARABLE
AT THIS MOMENT IN
TIME, BUT I MAY YET
WEATHER THE ORDEAL
AND COME AWAY
FROM IT.

IF I DO, WILL
YOU TRY TO KILL ME
AGAIN? IF YOU SAY
THAT HAVING TRIED AND
FAILED, YOU'LL PUT
ASIDE, HE LUDLOW
OBSESSION. IF YOU
SAY THAT, THEN I'LL
FORGIVE YOU THIS. WE
RESUME WHERE WE
LEFT OFF. WE'LL
LOVE ANEW.



SO? WILL
YOU AGREE TO
THIS?

OR DESPITE
OUR LOVE, YOU WILL
TRY TO MURDER ME
AGAIN?



I
MUST.



I LOVE
YOU, MARGUERITE.
I WILL ALWAYS
LOVE YOU

REMEMBER
THAT.







*I am
tired.*

*Thinking of
Marguerite has
made me sad.*

*I was going to write
of 1951. Of Keystone
City and Jay Garrick
and another hero. And how
the Ludlow name came to
taint even that merry time
of crime and speed and the
glorious joust.*

*I will, but
not tonight.*

Not tonight.

Wendy Wi

OLD-FASHIONED HOMESTYLE
COOKIES

THREE WONDERFUL VARIETIES

TO BE CONTINUED.

FROM THE SHADE'S JOURNAL

The man smiled back. "I suppose you have some weight to your argument, indeed." He extended his hand to us.

"My name is Basil Trent."

"I am Dario Carlei."

"I am James Black."

And so we began our game, Dario pulling cards with the swift aplomb of a stage magician summoning a rabbit from his top hat.

"What is it you do, Mr. Trent?" I asked this as the third hand was being played, Dario being the winner of the first two.

"I own mills."

"You are a kindred countryman?"

"You sound English, to be sure," he said. "Are you?"

"London born and raised."

"I am from Yorkshire."

"I thought so."

The train chugged on through the night and we played on with it. Dario's luck waned with the hour, however, and soon Trent began winning. Another hour and Trent had taken all but a little of the money I had made on my ghost-hunting venture. Suddenly idle travel was no longer my intention. Reaching Vienna quickly with my shirt still on my back became the sole thing on my mind. I played on, however, smiling all the while, and hoping I'd at least win back enough by the end of play that I could settle my drinks bill.

"Have we met?" I asked Trent later in the playing. It had come on me suddenly, a sense that Trent and I had met before.

"No. I think I should remember so fine a gentleman," he replied with a half smile. "Indeed, I think I should recall."

Trent looked back down at his cards. He seemed calm... calm as a good card player should be, but I detected a flicker to his eyes and the slightest of creases to his brow. It betrayed some hidden secret, of the sort I'm sure Dario would have taken great interest in.

"My friend and I were speaking earlier of secrets," I said. "He has an interest in the unknown corners of a man's soul."

"Well, he can have any interest he wants," Trent replied, "but he'll not gain entry to my unknown parts. Being a businessman means more than likely you've hurt a person or two along the way. If I have, and I'm not saying so, merely raising the suggestion, then I mean to keep such things to myself."

"You're a wise man," Dario said, then yawned and pulled his pocket watch from his vest. "I have to say I'm tired. As much as I would love to end this evening the richer for knowing you both, I fear I must end my card-playing the poorer."

"If I had won at least one hand I might end the night with more of a smile," I said. "But I can understand your wanting to stop now. I too would like my bed."

Trent arose, pocketing a goodly amount of bank notes. "It seems the pleasure was all mine."

"No. Not at all," I replied. "Good company is always a pleasure, even when

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"I'm the worse off funds for it."

The two men rose.

"Are you coming, sir?" Dario asked me.

"In a while. I'll just finish my brandy."

They left, talking as they made their way from the compartment. As they opened the door and ventured into the next carriage, so Trent gave me a cheerful wave. I waved back. And then they were gone...

... Which was when I sprang to my feet and ran after them. They would not expect me to follow so soon, and I hoped to overhear what they had to say. I was no fool. I seemed so this night, but that was merely my play... a greater play than mere cards. For how could a gambler be bested so readily and so often by a mill owner? And how could I never win a hand? No, from the eighth hand on I knew these two were working together. Fools they were for not letting me win even once.

I arrived in the next carriage as the train coming the other way stormed past us. The roar was deafening. The huge behemoth intermittently blocked out the moonlight streaming in, causing a flicker effect that cast the carriage interior into a moment's blackness.

As my eyes and ears adjusted, so the scene before me seemed strange in its stark clarity. Trent stood there trying to push Dario's body through one of the carriage windows. Dario was already dead, his head having been cleaved free by the other train. Now Trent wrestled with Dario's limp form. He looked almost comical as he did this, like a bad act on a music hall stage.

"You betray your partner, sir," I said. How ungallant.

Trent glanced my way with a start. "Not my partner," he replied. "Just a dupe for this one night."

"Why?"

"I wanted to take you, Shade. I wanted to best you at cards before I took your life."

He knew my identity. This boded for an interesting night's conclusion.

"Take my life, indeed," I whispered smiling. "Many have tried."

Trent left the body of Dario hanging half in and half out of the window like a broken doll. He turned to me and pulled a small pistol from his waistcoat.

"My real name is Ludlow. I'm an excellent shot."

"So am I," I replied, firing off a bolt of shadow that speared Trent/Ludlow before he could speak or shoot or do much of anything.

"Another Ludlow. How droll."

I spoke this aloud to Ludlow's corpse as I took the winnings from his pocket. With my money back, plus the stakes the other two men had, I'd made a profit on the evening.

I then had my shadow consume Ludlow's body. I left Dario where he was for the porters and early risers to find. I thought the notion of this pre-breakfast surprise for them too delicious to resist. And as the train came out of a mountain pass to reveal the first golden shards of dawn, I retired to my compartment.

TO BE CONTINUED

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Those are but a few examples. There were many others. Rupert and Emma had spawned much and sowed their hatred for me along with each new precious bundle they brought into the world.

And no one was dispatched to kill me without first having children of their own, so that had they failed there would be someone else to carry on the hatred after them.

My heavens, if this family had attacked the world of commerce with the zeal with which they attacked me, they would have rivaled the Rockefellers.

Lucky for the Rockefellers they thought me a far worthier goal.

I fought a Ludlow every few years from 1895 through to 1923. It seemed almost like part of life's cycle for me. Like spring to summer, so a Ludlow would emerge from the morning dew with some crazy scheme or other to bring me down. I fought them all over the world. I saw four years of the great war as a special agent to the Canadians, and fought a different Ludlow on a different theater of conflict in each one of those years. Indeed, witnesses to one encounter with the Ludlow, a general in the British army whose skills as a strategist were deemed invaluable, and me tearing his head from his shoulders - almost got me tried for treason.

Armistice for the world brought me no peace. 1919. I recall, being especially bloody, with one whole wing of the family (yes, by this point the foul clan had grown and spread to the point that they were in wings) had banded together for a mass onslaught.



And in 1923, I met Sanderson Ludlow, who had developed a friendship with me. He and I had shared a transatlantic voyage. At what point he intended to strike I don't know, and suppose never will. For in the course of the voyage we became chums. Indeed as a pair for bridge we were feared by everyone.

As the ship was within days of its final port of call he summoned me to his cabin and told me who he was and what his intention had been. He pulled a gun.

I was prepared to kill him, but felt sad that I had to-- Since Savage's passing, I had dared to like so few. Then, to my shock and dismay, Sanderson put the gun to his own head. I cannot bear to choose. Family or friendship. No, I will not be made to weigh one against the other. Before I could cry out or reason with him, he pulled the trigger.

That was the last Ludlow I saw for a while. Indeed, such was the wait for my next encounter, after fighting them with such regularity, that I thought perhaps I had killed them all and seen the last of their whole silly vendetta.